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On "Last Chance for Peace in Vietnam"

My friend Bob Komer shows evidence of qualifying for the title of champion of the unwarranted optimists—witness his letter of Feb. 11 commenting on my piece "Last Chance for Peace in Vietnam." Komer presents us with the happy news that "the real experts see even an unending Vietnamized war costing no more than \$2-\$3 billion for a few years yet". This would mean maintaining, feeding, paying, and equipping (with U.S. weapons) more than one million soldiers and 200,000 para-military and police at an annual rate of around \$2,000 per man. A pretty good bargain in any war.

Of course, this "expert" estimate doesn't take into consideration the cost of infrastructure weapon replacement lost in battle (especially helicopters and planes); nor such matters as the cost of refugee camps, road and bridge repair, U.S. air and sea transport of supplies, and all of the other costs of a continuing war which the U.S. taxpayer must pay.

Actually, my estimate of \$8 billion dollars is probably low, especially in view of the likelihood that U.S. strategic and tactical air support would continue even after U.S. troops were withdrawn. Komer's assertion that the price in 1971 "with all those Americans still there will probably be little over \$8 billion in all" is such a magical bit of cost accounting as not to merit further discussion.

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Having recently worked in Vietnam in the U.S. pacification program, I would like to comment on the letter from former Ambassador Robert W. Komer (Feb. 11) concerning Arthur Cox's guest column.

First, we certainly did back Thieu "with strong support" in 1967, although U.S. personnel obviously did not intervene overtly. To ensure Thieu's victory, lower- and middle-level Vietnamese officials, on orders from above, engaged in a wide variety of ballot-stuffing techniques, as is known by any Vietnamese-speaking U.S. advisor who takes the trouble to ask around. State Department officials used no effective leverage to prevent such dishonesty, but rather condoned whatever relatively discreet methods were necessary to assure the election of their friend.

Second, Mr. Komer's claim that we are not intervening on Thieu's behalf now is sim-

ply wrong. A few days before I resigned in November, I was told to supervise a U.S.-sponsored survey which, among other things, would help determine the people's attitudes towards the personalities and issues in the upcoming Vietnamese presidential campaign. The U.S. official now in charge of this kind of survey for all of Vietnam told me that the survey's items on the presidency had originated in a meeting between President Thieu and Ambassador William Colby, Mr. Komer's successor. These items, the official said, were designed specifically to tell President Thieu, for his own political benefit, what issues concerned the people most and which potential opposition candidates were the most popular in each of Vietnam's 44 provinces and 6 autonomous cities. Such cooperation at the highest levels falls within my definition of "support" and indeed "intervention," and is consistent with Ambassador Bunker's well-known personal attachment to President Thieu.

Third, President Thieu, like his American counterpart, is for "peace" and "negotiation" only in so far as these words mean "complete victory." The Vietnamese countryside is littered with officially-sponsored slogans such as "Coalition with the Communists is suicide" and "Not one square inch of our land for the Communists!" Since Thieu is utterly opposed to sharing any power whatsoever with the Communists, there is really nothing to be negotiated. Of course, we cannot be sure of what someone like Gen. Ninh would do, but his election to the presidency certainly could not lessen the chances of a negotiated political settlement.

Finally, it is hard to know for sure what the true balance of military power is in Indochina. Perhaps Mr. Komer is right in feeling that military victory for the U.S. and the South Vietnamese Armed Forces is just around the corner. Let us remember, though, that in late 1967 and January 1968, it was Mr. Komer who repeatedly assured us that the Communists were beaten and that they no longer had the capability of launching any significant assaults on the "pacified" nation of South Vietnam. Then came the famous "Tet Offensive." Since that time, I have relied on sources other than Mr. Komer for my information on Vietnam. I recommend that others do the same.

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